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**CITY OF NORWALK
FINANCE/CLAIMS COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING
FEBRUARY 18, 2021
BY ZOOM VIRTUAL TELECONFERENCE:**

ATTENDANCE: Gregory Burnett, Chair; Mayor Harry Rilling; David Heuvelman; Thomas Keegan; John Kydes; Diana Revolus; Nicholas Sacchinelli
(6:55 p.m.)

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Via Zoom Virtual Teleconference

STAFF: Henry Dachowitz, Chief Financial Officer; Chitsmay Lam, Controller;
Angela Fogel, Director Management and Budgets

OTHERS: Thomas Livingston and George Tsiranides (6:55 p.m.), Common Council
members; Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Superintendent of Norwalk Public
Schools

PUBLIC HEARING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Burnett opened the public hearing at 6:36 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Mr. Burnett called the Roll as indicated above. A Quorum was present.

3. PUBLIC HEARING ON FISCAL YEAR 2021 - 2022 RECOMMENDED OPERATING BUDGET

Mr. Burnett gave opening remarks and said he looked forward to everyone's input. He added that he hoped that in the near future, they will be able to conduct these meetings in person. Mr. Burnett said the public hearing will not address items in the capital budget.

The goal is to keep taxes as low as possible. The plan is to draw down funds from the general fund balance during the fiscal year; however, it is essential that this draw down not impact the City's posture with its AAA bond rating.

Mr. Burnett reviewed the procedures for the public hearing and noted that each speaker will be given three minutes. He said that all the e-mails that have been received have been distributed to all Common Council members and will be included as part of the meeting minutes.

Mayor Rilling shared his opening remarks and thanked everyone on the Finance Claims Committee, the Common Council members and Mr. Dachowitz and his team. He said these are very challenging times and he recognizes the economic hardships that exist. This body is responsible for developing a budget that is fair and equitable without overtaxing the residents while providing services that the residents need and deserve. Mayor Rilling said that Norwalk gets over 90% of its revenue through property tax. He

said they are trying to keep the tax increase as low as possible and trying to keep the spending down.

Mayor Rilling said this is just the beginning of the budgeting process for both the operating and capital budgets. Each department is held accountable and required to live within their budget.

Mr. Kydes said this is not a business as usual budget, but he believes they will be able to properly fund the City services and the Board of Education. He said he feels comfortable with moving the City forward with this budget.

Mr. Burnett reviewed the public hearing procedures.

Public hearing comments are not verbatim and represent a summarization of statements unless otherwise noted.

Ms. Diane Lauricella said she has lived in Norwalk for 35 years. She asked the Committee to vote no to raise the cap. She said that many of the departments have not met the challenge to find creative ways to cut expenditures and some departments have not been creative in raising revenues. She said she does not see fine enforcement and the Board of Education failed, yet again, to cut expenses. Ms. Lauricella added that the City does not have an effective grant process.

Ms. Margaret Kozlark said she was a long time resident and a local real estate agent. She said that many times when she is showing homes, the buyers make derogatory remarks about Norwalk schools. She said her daughter attended Norwalk public schools, but she put her son in a private school. She said that a high quality school system has an impact on home values. Ms. Kozlark said she did not understand why the City was getting a 6% increase and the school is getting 2%. She said that it is the kids who suffer. She asked what was left to cut. Without investing in schools, the perception of low quality schools will continue. The school system is in crisis. She asked that the Board of Education be fully funded.

Mr. Sacchinelli and Mr. Tsiranides joined the meeting at 6:55 p.m.

Ms. Nora Angelski said they came to Norwalk because they believed in the progress of the Norwalk Public Schools. She said it was crucial to fully fund the Board of Education budget. She said that Covid is a tremendous stress and this is not the time to cut funding. She said that Norwalk can attract large companies, but only if their employees want to send their children to Norwalk Public Schools.

Ms. Theresa Peterson said she has a child in Kindergarten and spoke in support of the Common Council fully funding the schools. She said the students have missed a lot because of Covid and they need to put the money into the schools to get the kids up to speed. She asked where the school is able to cut \$5 million.

Ms. April Wenersteim said she sits on the governance council at her school and that it is a challenge year after year. She asked the Committee to continue to support Dr. Estrella's initiatives.

Ms. Anne Hennessey said she is a parent of a first grade student. She said she was here to advocate for the students at Kendall Elementary School and noted they will suffer without the Magnet School funding. She noted that this is the last Magnet School to be added to Norwalk and is concerned that it will be the first on the chopping block. She asked the Committee to approve the Board of Education's request.

Mr. Burnett reviewed the public hearing procedures for anyone who may have joined the public hearing.

Mr. Erik Neiderer raised an issue about Fox Run Elementary School. He said it has been identified as a school in need. It has a large Special Education community. He said his family member was transferred from another school to Fox Run and they are doing well. He asked the Committee to consider the request from Fox Run.

Mr. Tyler Fairbairn said he is a parent, homeowner and a taxpayer. He implored the Committee to fully fund the schools. He said he wanted to be sure the parents' voices were heard. He said that people go where the schools are good and that spending on schools is an investment in the community.

Ms. Barbara Meyer Mitchell, Board of Education said she was here to request that the Committee look at balancing the allocation between the City and the Board of Education. She said she did not expect such an uneven budget. The needs for the Board of Education are great. She said Norwalk Public Schools should be a leader and show how diverse communities can succeed.

Ms. Lam read the names and addresses of those who submitted letters.

4. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Burnett asked if anyone else wished to speak and again reviewed the public hearing procedures.

Hearing none, the public hearing was unanimously adjourned at 7:15 p.m.

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BY ZOOM VIRTUAL TELECONFERENCE:**

ATTENDANCE: Gregory Burnett, Chair; Mayor Harry Rilling; David Heuvelman; Thomas Keegan; John Kydes; Diana Revolus; Nicholas Sacchinelli

STAFF: Henry Dachowitz, Chief Financial Officer; Chitsmay Lam, Controller; Angela Fogel, Director Management and Budgets

OTHERS: Thomas Livingston and George Tsiranides, Common Council members; Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Superintendent of Norwalk Public Schools

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Burnett called the special meeting to order at 7:16 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Mr. Burnett called the Roll as indicated above. A Quorum was present.

**3. FISCAL YEAR 2021 - 2022 RECOMMENDED OPERATING BUDGET AND
CAP REVIEW;
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION TO THE COMMON COUNCIL.**

Mr. Burnett read the following:

The maximum limit on the total appropriation for the City of Norwalk for Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2021 shall be no more than \$384,676,326. This appropriation cap represents total expenditures of \$400,599,192 less estimated intergovernmental grants of \$15,922,866.

Mr. Burnett asked for a vote.

Mr. Heuvelman thanked everyone who spoke tonight. He said the comments were reflective. He said that everyone believes the schools are very important to the community and no one wants substandard schools. Mr. Heuvelman said we are in the middle of a pandemic and there are a lot of changes going on – there is a new administration in the Public Schools. He said he believes there is some way to support that vision.

Mr. Heuvelman said he felt there was an inequity between the City and the Education side and would entertain going up to 2.5% or 3%. He said the taxpayers understand that taxes will need to go up.

Mr. Kydes said he heard there is a lot of impact on housing because of the schools. He said it was important to point out that the City supported some of the largest budget increases for the Board of Education. He noted that the City cannot give the Board of Education less than it did the year before. He said a lot was put into the budget over the last five years to fund the Board of Education.

Mr. Kydes said he has some reservations and is waiting for further information. He said he wants to know the impact on taxpayers.

**** MR. KYDES MOVED TO THE FULL COMMON COUNCIL THE MAXIMUM LIMIT ON THE TOTAL APPROPRIATION FOR THE CITY OF NORWALK FOR FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2021 SHALL BE NO MORE THAN \$384,676,326. THIS APPROPRIATION CAP REPRESENTS TOTAL EXPENDITURES OF \$400,599,192 LESS ESTIMATED INTERGOVERNMENTAL GRANTS OF \$15,922,866.**

Mr. Sacchinelli said that the Board of Education has done a lot of great work and funding the Board of Education has shown fruit, but this is a time of great need for all the residents.

Mr. Keegan said he was concerned that when they are trying to find enough money for the operating budget, there was a large miscalculation regarding the cost of the health benefit at \$2 million. He said it bothers him that they found it at the last minutes. Mr. Keegan said that it appears at the end of the year, Norwalk Public Schools finds money they can carry over to the next year. He asked if their budget is as cut to the bone as expected. He said he first attended a Board of Education public hearing in 1990 with his first child and said the message plays out year after year. He said he agreed that the schools are important and understands Mr. Heuvelman's position, but he said he was willing to move this forward to the full Common Council.

Ms. Revolus said she works hard to be sure the students and the community are represented. The children are the most vulnerable and as a parent understands wanting to make it sustainable for everyone. She said she wants to be sure the children and families are cared for. She said she wants a healthy, vibrant community.

Mr. Burnett said this is the beginning of the process. He said if the Board of Estimate requests an increase to the cap, it will come back to the Common Council for review.

**** MOTION PASSED WITH FOUR (4) VOTES IN FAVOR (MR. BURNETT; MR. KEEGAN; MR. KYDES; MS. REVOLUS) AND ONE (1) VOTE IN OPPOSITION (MR. HEUVELMAN)**

4. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. HEUVELMAN MOVED TO ADJOURN
** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

There was no further business and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 7:33 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi
Telesco Secretarial Services